Opinion
NCR Voices



Pope Francis speaks to Italian bishops in the Vatican synod hall during the general assembly of the Italian bishops' conference May 20. (CNS/Vatican Media)



by Michael Sean Winters

View Author Profile

Follow on Twitter at @michaelswinters

## Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

May 29, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The full ambivalence of Pope Francis' pastoral approach to the issue of homosexuality has come into view, first during his television interview with CBS News' Norah O'Donnell, and now with the news that he told the Italian bishops' conference that gay men should not be allowed to enter the seminary. Is this the same pope who, early in his pontificate, when asked about a gay clergyman who keeps his vows, asked rhetorically, "Who am I to judge?"

Yes, it is.

Part of the confusion about the decision to permit blessings of gay people who are in a relationship stems from the Vatican's own press coverage of the document *Fiducia Supplicans* when it was promulgated last December. Vatican News produced the headline: "Doctrinal declaration opens the possibility of blessing couples in irregular situations." Couples, not individuals.

When reading the English translation of the document, it clearly states, at Paragraph 11:

> … it is necessary that what is blessed corresponds with God's designs written in creation and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. For this reason, since the Church has always considered only those sexual relations that are lived out within marriage to be morally licit, the Church does not have the power to confer its liturgical blessing when that would somehow offer a form of moral legitimacy to a union that presumes to be a marriage or to an extra-marital sexual practice.

But the very next paragraph sets the stage for the pastoral application of the doctrinal principle, stating, "One must also avoid the risk of reducing the meaning of blessings to this point of view alone. … Indeed, there is the danger that a pastoral gesture that is so beloved and widespread will be subjected to too many moral prerequisites, which, under the claim of control, could overshadow the unconditional power of God's love that forms the basis for the gesture of blessing."

This was the heart of the document: God's unconditional love "forms the basis for the gesture of blessing." The pope was indicating that a pastor, charged with helping all persons develop and deepen their relationship with God, can impart a blessing on persons whose situation is, in the eyes of the church, irregular. "The shift Francis intends is, at once, less exact and more profound than a doctrinal shift," I wrote at the time. "What Francis has been trying to achieve for many years is to relocate the place of doctrine within the magisterium of the church, specifically to insist that doctrine serve the good of souls, not the other way round."

Advertisement

The issue of gay seminarians is entirely different from that of blessing gay unions: No doctrinal issues are involved. So long as a seminarian is celibate, and has maturely integrated his celibacy into his life, it should not matter if he is straight or gay.

We do not have a transcript of what the pope said to the Italian bishops and, especially, what question prompted him to say what he did. There have been instances of seminaries with a gay subculture that was destructive of the formation the seminary existed to impart. The fact that the pope may have used a vulgar Italian word, *frociaggine* — translated as "queerness" in most media accounts but I suspect "campiness" is closer to what was meant — when discussing the subject suggests he might have had in mind precisely such a situation. The pope has now apologized for using the term.

The idea that the pope has suddenly revealed his hidden bigotry towards gay persons, which seems to be the consensus on social media, is ridiculous. Nothing about this man or his papacy suggests he is bigoted towards anyone.

Whence, then, this ambivalence in the pope's statements? How did he go from "Who am I to judge?" to this? It has to do with the inherent conflict of his position as pope. He is the universal pastor of the church and he is the defender of Christian doctrine. He wants to help people grow closer to God, and knows that accompanying them, not judging them, is the best way to achieve that. He also believes what the church teaches.

**Related:** Pope apologizes after being quoted using vulgar term about gay men in talk about ban on gay priests

It is this last point that the activists on both sides forget. His critics have feared he was seeking to undermine the church's moral teaching, on this and other issues, even though it was obvious all along that what he was doing was placing that moral teaching within a pastoral context, not as the price of admission to a pastoral context. Others thought he was moving slowly for political reasons, that once he got the church to swallow pastoral accompaniment, it would be easier to get it to swallow a change in moral teaching. That, too, misrepresented the pope's approach.

Contra the so-called traditionalists, Francis knows that our Catholic tradition is one of reform. Contra the so-called progressives, Francis knows that the reform happens within a defined tradition, and is not subject to the latest academic invention or social fad. Our tradition is rooted ultimately in revelation. We improve our understanding of revelation the way we humans do everything, two steps forward, one step back, a lot of floundering around in the dark, confused and conflated ideas and ambitions all in the mix. But the revelation itself is a given. It can't be turned into Silly Putty and stretched any which way we want.

As the many negative reactions to *Fiducia Supplicans* demonstrated, the church has not reached any kind of consensus on issues related to ministry to gay men and women. Here is where the promise of synodality emerges. It aims to attune everyone in the church to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, to relativize what I want or you want with what God wants. Discerning God's will is something the church must do together. The whole must judge the parts.

Let's not lose sight of what is important. Our vocation as Christians is to follow the Lord and we Catholics understand that vocation to be one we undertake together, as a people, the people of God, not just as individuals. Forbearance is needed as much as foresight, and fidelity as well as solicitude. The synodal process brings these differing values together in ways that allow the Lord's will to make itself determinative in our deliberations.

"The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going," Jesus said (John 3:8). "So is everyone who is born of the Spirit."

**Related:** LGBTQ Catholic groups call pope's use of Italian slur 'shocking and hurtful'

A version of this story appeared in the **June 7-20, 2024** print issue under the headline: Pope's comments are not as shocking as some think.